

Dr. King's Son Says Family Believes Ray

By KEVIN SACK

NASHVILLE, March 27 — In an extraordinary face-to-face meeting in a prison conference room, James Earl Ray told the youngest son of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. today that he did not assassinate his father, and the son, Dexter Scott King, told Mr. Ray that the King family was convinced of his innocence.

As Mr. Ray seeks to clear his name before dying of liver disease, Mr. King's assertion reflects a remarkable evolution by the family of the slain civil rights leader.

For most of the nearly three decades since Dr. King was shot in Memphis on April 4, 1968, the King family has maintained a studied silence about the guilt of Mr. Ray, who confessed to the crime, then recanted after being sentenced to a 99-year prison term. But in the last two months, with Mr. Ray's health deteriorating rapidly, the King family has become his outspoken ally: first by telling reporters that there were legitimate evidentiary questions to explore, then by testifying in support of a new trial for Mr. Ray, and finally by declaring today that Mr. Ray was innocent.

"I just want to ask you, for the record, did you kill my father?" Mr. King, 36, asked Mr. Ray as the two men sat facing each other, a yard apart, in wooden armchairs.

Mr. Ray, 69, replied: "No, no, I didn't, no. But like I say, sometimes these questions are difficult to answer, and you have to make a personal evaluation."

Mr. King said: "Well, as awkward as this may seem, I want you to know that I believe you and my family believes you, and we are going to do everything in our power to try and make sure that justice will prevail. And while it's at the 11th hour, I've always been a spiritual person and I believe in Providence."

Aides to Mr. King said he had been trying to arrange the meeting with Mr. Ray — the first between Mr. Ray and a member of the King family — for several months. As president of the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta, Mr. King has served in recent years as the principal spokesman for his mother, Coretta Scott King, and his three siblings.

Accompanied by William F. Pep-

per, Mr. Ray's lawyer, Mr. King arrived 15 minutes late for the meeting at the Lois M. DeBerry Special Needs Facility, a boxy state prison in Nashville for sick and disabled inmates. Shortly after Mr. King was ushered into the concrete-block conference room, Mr. Ray was guided into the room in a wheelchair.

The frail Mr. Ray, dressed in prison blues and cloth slippers, rose to greet the robust Mr. King, who wore a navy suit, a bold red tie and shiny black shoes. As they shook hands, Mr. King, who bears a striking resemblance to his father, said, "Glad to meet you. Thank you for letting

A remarkable meeting in a Tennessee prison.

me come and impose on your time."

Like heads of state at a White House photo op, the two men sat in facing chairs with their hands folded over their laps and with tiny microphones clipped to their jackets. After about 25 minutes, the few reporters allowed to witness the scene were dismissed, and Mr. King and Mr. Ray spoke privately for 20 minutes.

During the public part of the meeting, Mr. King did most of the talking. The conversation was awkward and stilted, with Mr. King filling the silences left by Mr. Ray and with Mr. Ray rambling far from the topic of his role in Dr. King's killing. His face etched with creases, Mr. Ray has

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been severely weakened by cirrhosis, and he complained to Mr. King that his stomach was distended.

"My stomach is kind of falling out, and I need minor surgery, but other than that we're just, you know, taking things day for day, I guess you could say," he told Mr. King. "And, of course, you've got your problems, too. You've had them for a long time now."

It took Mr. King nearly 15 minutes to pose the question he had come to ask. He first told Mr. Ray that he considered their meeting "a spiritual experience."

"I guess in some strange way our

jestries, that of my father and yourself, somehow got tied up together, and we still don't feel as a family that we have all of the questions answered," he told Mr. Ray.

Later he added, "In a strange sort of way, we're both victims."

At one point, Mr. Ray volunteered, "I ain't had nothing to do with shooting your father."

Since Dr. King's assassination on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, most official inquiries, including a Congressional examination, have concluded that Mr. Ray probably fired the fatal shot.

A bank robber who had escaped from a Missouri prison at the time of the shooting, Mr. Ray had rented a room in a boarding house across the street from the motel. His fingerprints were found on a rifle that was dropped outside the house. After the shooting, he fled to Atlanta, Canada, Portugal and England before being arrested. He pleaded guilty in 1969.

But after his sentencing, Mr. Ray

said he had pleaded guilty under pressure from his lawyers to avoid the death penalty. He has said since then that he had been framed "as a patsy" by a shadowy figure named Raoul. And Mr. Pepper, his lawyer for the last 19 years, has suggested a number of conspiracies that he outlined two years ago in a book.

Mr. Pepper has argued that modern tests would prove that Mr. Ray's rifle did not fire the bullet that killed Dr. King, an assertion questioned by some ballistics experts. Last month Mr. Pepper asked a judge in Memphis to order the new tests, believing that favorable results would force a new trial. The judge has referred the question to an appellate court, which

has not ruled.

Without a ruling from the court and a liver transplant for Mr. Ray, Mr. Pepper said today, "We're going to be stalled out of existence."

At a news conference after the meeting today, Mr. King declined to say what evidence had convinced him of Mr. Ray's innocence. He also denied that his interaction with Mr. Ray was designed to generate interest in a movie deal that Mr. King and the agent for Dr. King's estate, Philip Jones, have been negotiating with Oliver Stone, the film maker.

"I'm not Oliver Stone," he said. "I'm not a conspiracy theorist."

But Mr. King made it clear that he had been influenced by Mr. Pepper's theories, and he briefly mentioned the story of Lloyd Jowers. Mr. Jowers, a former Memphis tavern owner, said on national television in 1993 that he had hired a man — not Mr. Ray — to kill Dr. King at the request of a grocer with reputed mob connections. His story has never been proved.

Asked at the news conference who killed his father, Mr. King said, "I don't know. Again that's why a trial, I think, is so necessary. I do think that attorney Pepper has some very compelling evidence that will lead in that direction. You know, I can't prove this. I'm a very instinctual person. My instincts tend to tell me when things are not right. I can't always put my finger on it but I can say this, that I have felt this sense of suppression, that there are those forces out there that don't want what has been in darkness to come to light."

NO SPECIFIC THREATS HAD BEEN RECEIVED.

Elvid L. Martinez, the commissioner of the agency, the Bureau of Reclamation, said his agency planned to spend an additional \$15 million for security at the dams over the next three years, including \$6 million that was being shifted from other programs this year.

Mr. Martinez also said the bureau, which manages 475 dams and locks across the West, including 58 large electricity-generating dams, planned to create the position of security director to coordinate efforts throughout the dam system.

In a report to the agency on dam safety, an independent panel, the Association of State Dam Safety Officials, recommended that the bureau push ahead with a "complete assessment" of security at all of its dams.

Mr. Martinez said an internal review had been completed at five dams, but he would not identify the dams or provide details.

"The vulnerability to sabotage and terrorism at many facilities is very high," said the independent report, though it provided no further assessment of security concerns.

Mr. Martinez declined to give any detailed explanation of what prompted the renewed focus on security at the dams, which include some of the world's largest. He said only that the agency had grown increasingly con-